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KEEZHADI – A Fair Copy of the History of Civilization

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Abstract : The excavation activities being undertaken at Keezhadi village of Sivaganga District have invited euphoric attention of historians not only in India but also all over the world. There is a perception raised amongst historians that extensive archaeological excavations being found at Keezhadi will change the important chapter of the history of civilization. This paper focuses particularly on the recent findings in southern part of Tamilnadu which once again proves the existence of Sangam Age and the link of Tamilnadu with ancient cultural as well as urban civilization. Major findings including brick wall, drainage system, terracotta ring wells with inscription of Tamil Brahmi are considered older than those findings of Rakigari in Haryana and even Indus vally civilization.

KEY WORDS : Keezhadi, civilization, Tamil, ancestors, ancient life style.

INTRODUCTION : The findings of just 10% of the identified area of 110 acres in Sivaganga District has now reached a significant place in archaeological map of India. It is informed that around 13,600 artefacts were unearthed form Keezhadi site till now. In case of extension of excavation works covering entire proposed area and other parts of Vaigai river will be a treasure for archaeologists and historians. Tamil Nadu witnessed many developments recently in the field of archaeological research carried out by various organizations including Archaeological Survey of India till date. Many institutions including Archaeological Survey of India, Southern circle; State Department of Archaeology; University of Madras; Tamil University, Thanjavur; Sharma Centre for Heritage Education; Sir Chandra Sekharendra Saraswathi Viswa Maha Vidyalaya (Deemed University) Enathur, Kancheepuram and Kerala University are involved in the excavation works. The area of excavation may also extend in case of vide operation covering entire southern part of Tamil Nadu including Madurai, Theni, Dindigul, Sivaganga, Virudhunagar, Tirunvelveli, Tuticorin, Kanyakumari and Ramanathapuram districts. The potent archaeological wealth of these districts will become a great bounty to archeologists and historians

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leading to make a fair copy of the history of civilization. There is a need for a cumulative efforts from all segments not only from the public departments and institutions but also every student of the History.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF KEEZHADI

Keezhadi, a village in Manamadurai taluk of Sivaganga district (Latitude 9° N and Longitude 78° E, normal climate of 30 °C, Wind E at 6 km/h, 66% Humidity) is situated in south east of Madurai on the National Highway leading to Rameshvaram via Tiruppuvanam. It is located on the south bank of river Vaigai and surrounded by villages Kondagai and Manalur. The name Keezhadi could have derived for its location lying to the east of '*Kuntidevi Chaturvetimangalam*'. The area of excavation initially is estimated that 110 acres with 4.5 km in circumference.

EARLY EXPLORATIONS

The excavation works have been carried out on this site in five phases with limited area of the location. The full swing exploration was initiated only in 2014 by Archaeological Survey of India which was extended till 2017 in three phases. In addition to this, the Government of Tamilnadu has carried out the fourth and fifth phase and been continuing to till date. Initially, in late 1950's, an overall survey was undertaken covering Madurai, Tirumangalam, Melur and Periyagulam by Archaeological Survey of India, Southern Circle. However, later on, it was discontinued for next five six decades. It is observed that after long gap one Thiru V. Balasubramanian who was the headmaster of a Government High School at Keezhadi discovered some archaeological artefacts at Pillichandai Thidal in 1978 and identified that such terracotta artefacts at Pallichandai Thidal are belonging to 14th century. It was the basic spark invited more historians from time to time. But only in 2014, the excavation works were carried out in speedly and identified 293 sites with archeological remains on either side of the Vaigai river. Of these 293 sites, mounds, brick structures, potsherds were found everywhere.

FOUR PHASES OF EXCAVATION FROM 2014 TO 2018

The first phase of excavation began in March 2015 and extended for six months in which forty two trenches were dug and many of them yielded structures made of large sized bricks that typically belong to the early historic period. The antiquities, iron implements and earthenware are of locally and foreign made and dating back to 3 BC. Such antiquities once again has proved the foreign trade existed in the region during this period.

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A total of 59 quadrants were opened during the second phase of excavation. During the second phase, the artifacts unearthed by the archaeological team established substantial evidence that an ancient urban civilization had thrived on the banks of Vaigai. The structures comprise of brick walls, rectangular chamber, brick floor corridor and tanks. The presence of large number of handmade grooved tiles indicates the existence of tiled roof above the structure. More than 8,000 artifacts including pottery with Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, gold coins, beads, iron tools and jewellery which indicated that an urban civilization had existed during the Sangam era — between the 4th century BCE and 2nd century CE that is regarded as a golden era for Tamil language, literature and culture — and that it had trade link with other civilizations including Rome.

The third and fourth phase of the excavations were conducted by Archaeological Survey of India from January 2017. The work ended on 30 September 2017. In the third phase, 16 digging sites were selected, taking up a total area of 400 square meters. While the third phase was led by ASI, the Tamil Nadu archaeology department started the fourth phase and has unearthed more than 7,000 antiques.

EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL RESERVES AT KEEZHADI

The cuttings made at different localities of the site have indicated the cultural richness of our ancient civilization. Based on the material evidences accumulated from all four phases of excavation at Keezhadi, a threefold cultural period is being proposed with possibility of sub-cultural phases. On the basis structures and things explored during the last four excavations, the cultural periods are divided . The remains explored from the site are structural remains, Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherds, copper coins, non cultural zone pottery like indigenous black and red ware, white painted black and red ware, russet coated painted ware and associated artefacts. The archaeologists classified cultural periods tentatively dated as from c. 3rd cent. BC to 10th cent. AD and the latest date of the site i.e. 10th cent. AD was arrived on the basis of the surface finding ofa copper coin datable to the Chola king Rajaraja I.

As such, the broad classification of the cultural period at Keezhadi is as follows:

- ✓ Period I – Iron Age (pre 300 BC)
- ✓ Period II – Early Historic Period (300 BC – 300 AD)
- ✓ Period III – Post Early Historic Period (Post 300 AD)

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KEY FINDINGS- POTTERIES

Besides exploration basic structures as a symbol of advanced urban civilization, the potteries found from the excavations by and large displayed indigenous character with minimal intrusion of external ceramic varieties. The broad classification of the pottery repertoire is as follows.

- o Coarse red ware
- o Red slipped ware
- o Black and red ware
- o White painted black and red ware
- o Black ware
- o Russet coated painted ware
- o White painted red ware
- o Matt impressed ware
- o Perforated ware
- o Rouletted ware

The red ware and black red ware ceramic variety was more preferred for writing purpose. The nature of these writing on the pottery was primarily aimed to register names of individuals probably its owner's. One of the characteristic feature found with this ware at the lower level was the presence of painted designs on the exterior. The painting was made with some natural white colour very lightly applied around the neck portion. There are few instances where the designs found to be executed even upto the carination of pots.

The site has also yielded more than seventy Tamil - Brahmi inscribed potsherds and nearly six hundred graffiti sherds. Further the occurrence of other materials like carnelian, agate beads, ivory items, copper objects, russet coated pottery etc certainly indicate its internal trade contacts maintained with different parts of the country. Findings of gold ornaments, copper articles, beads of gems, more than

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4000 beads of semiprecious stones, glass beads, shell bangles, ivory bangle pieces, comb and terracotta objects indicate the cultural richness and economic prosperity.

Previously in the year 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-17 excavation was conducted for three seasons by the Excavation Branch-Bangalore, Archaeological Survey of India. The fourth and fifth season of excavations were taken up by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology during 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. In continuation of exposing the hidden treasures and antique of this site, the State Department of Archaeology has been conducting large scale excavation at this site. The Systematic archaeological excavations of the fifth seasons are still in progress. The antiquities of Keezhadi excavation really reflect the facts of the ancient life style of the society. In fact, agriculture seems to be its prime occupation being supplemented by iron industry, carpentry, pottery making and weaving industries.

CONCLUSION : It is a matter of historical value to have thousands of artifacts within in meager area which would be a paramount in case of extension of excavation works to next level. In addition, to this the archaeological tools available within the country are not modern and majority of findings have been sent to US or Italy for discovery of exact era to which it belongs to. Generally, concept of Sangam Age believed till now as the periods between 3rd century BCE and 3rd century CE. But after the new findings and the carbon samples of the objects excavated from Keezhadi push the date of Tamil Brahmi to 6th century BCE. Therefore, there is a huge possibility for re-determination of historical dates which were fixed according to the findings till now. Further, in case of conduction of wide excavation, it would be a treasure of knowledge about ancient Tamil history.

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